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The Study of Russian Language in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract: From extant literature, it has been established that the study of Russian language in Nigeria is as old as the country's independence when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established. Like some other newly introduced courses, it started as a minor but later became a full degree course. The study of Russian language in Nigeria has gone through thin and thick in the past four decades. However, there is no doubt that the language has come to stay in Nigeria as it is currently maintaining third position after English and French among foreign languages studied in Nigeria. Looking at the onward progress made in this field of study in the last fifty eight years, Russian Language in Nigeria is embedded with some obvious bottlenecks. The objective of the study is to examine the problems and prospects of studying Russian language in the modern day Nigeria. The study utilizes the methods of descriptive analysis and synthesis of the scientific literature. Lastly, requisite conclusion and policy recommendations were provided to uplift the benefits of studying Russian language in Nigeria.

Keywords: Russian Language; Problems; Prospects; Nigerian Universities

1. Introduction

The study of Russian language in Nigeria dates back to 1960, when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established and the course introduced, first, as a minor, and later, as a full course. And as a new discipline, it started with only six students who were bold to explore into the seeming "strange" area of study. This is because, only English and French were familiar languages studied in primary and secondary schools respectively (Odunuga, 1981). As a result of successful introduction of the course at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the authorities of the University of Ibadan equally introduced it, and like at University of Nigeria, Nsukka too, the patronage was very low as very few students, mainly out of curiosity and the zeal delved into this unknown terrain of academic adventure (Chukwube, 2010).

Having succeeded at University of Nigeria, Nsukka and University of Ibadan, the study of Russian language as a degree course spread to the University of Lagos in 1970 and to the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), which unfortunately could not progress with the course after a short time. Russian as a

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sub-discipline was added into the Department of European Language, University of Lagos in 1970/1971 academic session, first, as a minor, but in 1983, it became a full-fledged degrees programme (Ade-Ojo, 2006). The number of students studying Russian language at the University of Lagos has been on the increase in subsequent years. In 2003/2004 academic session alone, 34 students were admitted and 2009/2010 academic session, the Department has 53 students studying Russian language (Chukwube, 2010). However, the patronage is still very low at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, as the Department has only 8 students' presently studying Russian language. It is expected that the students' population will further increase in subsequent years. While this could be said about the university of Lagos and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, it was not a success story at the Obafemi Awolowo University, where the course went moribund no sonner it was established, thanks to dearth of qualified lecturers to handle the course.

The study of Russian language in Nigeria has gone through thin and thick in the last four decades. However, there is no doubt that the language has come to stay in Nigeria as it is currently maintaining third position after English and French among foreign languages studied in Nigeria. Looking at the onward progress made in this field of study in the last fifty eight years, Russian language in Nigeria is surrounded with some obvious bottlenecks. Therefore, the analysis of problems and prospects of studying Russian language in Nigeria is the mainstream of this study.

2. Methodology

The study utilizes the methods of descriptive analysis and synthesis of the scientific literature. That is, data for this study were sourced from primary and secondary sources and collected from documentations through published and unpublished books, seminar papers, journal articles, conference proceedings among others, and were content analyzed in relation to the scope of the study.

3. Russian Language and its Importance in Nigeria

In order to put this theoretical study in a proper and explicit perspective, we first attempted to explain the meaning of language and thereafter, attempt was made to explain the importance of studying Russian language in Nigeria.

Language is "a system of sounds and written symbols used by the people of a particular country, area, or tribe to communicate with each other" (BBC English Dictionary, 1993, p. 627). Language is also understood to be an essential element of the thought processes of human beings, their perceptions, attitudes, self-expressions and world view (Wagaba, 2010). According to Ehusani, 2017 cited in Okoedion (2018, p. 118), language is "a sacred gift, developed in the course of human evolution, it is the sophisticated instrument of socialization and

communication that distinguishes one group of people from the other and sets homo-sapiens apart from all other living organisms. Language is the chief medium for the communication of civilizations, customs, traditions, habits, wisdom, value and lifestyles of a people". To many scholars, the concept "language" is viewed in various perspectives. That is perhaps why Sapir (1921) argued that, language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. While language becomes necessary for groups, Bloch and Trager, 1942 cited in Omotade and Oluwafemi (2018) affirmed that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which a social group cooperates. Arising from the different views of various scholars, one can draw a conclusion or infer that language cannot be separated from man as it has been the major means of communication in human society.

The divergent views in relation to foreign languages, their functions and their imperativeness are generally reflected in the various approaches to the study of foreign languages among scholars. However, the importance of studying Russian language in the modern day Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. There is need for Nigeria to be an integral part of the Global villages in which multilingualism is a sine-qua-non and in the context of the leadership role that Nigeria has to play in international politics and diplomacy, by virtue of her population, natural resources, economic resilience and political relevance, the importance of major European languages cannot be relegated to the background in the curriculum of Nigerian universities, whose central objective is to prepare and provide the much needed manpower for the development of the country and also for the sustenance of its administrative machinery. The Russian language, as the lingua franca or the transnational language of the old Soviet Union is a world language, whose impact in international politics and diplomacy, scientific researches, technology, industrial development particularly steel and the formulation as well as the exploitation of political ideologies, is universally accepted. Science students in Nigerian universities need a knowledge of Russian language for purposes of reading in the original "technical" or "scientific" literature related to their field, since a large amount of material are published in the language and since much is often lost in the translation (Chukwube, 2010).

Apart from being beneficial to science students, it is also very important to arts students and lovers of literature. While is true that great names in Russian literatures are known in the West through translation (Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky etc.) there are others whose works are still being sought after by scholars realizing that the depth of thought and message can only be reached in the original. Pushkin, who started the 'Golden age' Russian literature in 1825, for example, is not as widely known as Tolstoy and Chekhov (Odunuga, 2005). This is not because his work is of less importance, but because it has always been difficult to translate him adequately from Russian. Going beyond learning Russian as an academic course of study and for a limited purpose, there are those who have to use

the language on a wider scale. Epitomizing on globalization that depicts the world as a village, there is today a wider contacts between Africa and Russia in areas of economy, education, commerce and culture which has necessitated and attracted the interest of both the federal and some state governments of Nigeria to encourage many of its citizenry to sponsored programmes. This is expected to yield the needed professionals in different areas of specialization, including interpreters and translators for the nation (Odunuga, 2005; Chukwube, 2010). It is obvious from the foregoing that the benefits of studying Russian language in Nigeria universities are enormous.

4. Russian Language Programme in Nigerian Universities

The Russian language in Nigerian universities is a four year programme designed that three years of the programme is done in Nigeria while one year emersion programme is done in any recognized University or Institute in Ruassian. Going by this arrangement, students completed year one and two in departments in Nigeria while third year is abroad and fourth year is completed in Nigeria. At inception of the courses in different university, admission rate was very low with sometimes not more than two or three candidates as in the case of University of Nigeria, Nsukka and University of Lagos respectively. The diplomatic relations between USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) now Russia started fifty eight years ago. Russia, being the legitimate heir to the USSR in 1961, opened its Embassy in Lagos, both countries have maintained cordial political, economic and cultural relationships but not without some disagreements. However, Soviet involvement in Nigeria, just like in many other African countries diminished greatly in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* (reconstruction) of the middle 80s. With the cold war continuing and the Soviet economy in shambles, the USSR had little incentive to continue its active presence in Africa. By the time of Soviet Union disintegration in 1991, the country had lost much of its influence and prominence in Nigeria and Africa in general (Waliyullahi, 2016). Unfortunately, the Soviet Union disintegration greatly affected the emersion programme as earlier indicated.

The benefits of the emersion programme cannot be over emphasized. According to Odunuga, 1981 cited in Chukwube (2010, p. 25), "as a result of an agreement signed in the 80s by the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Professor Olajuwon S. Olayide with the then director of the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language, Moscow, Professor V.G. Kostomarov, students of the University of Ibadan had the privilege of having the emersion programme in the institute. They were later joined by their colleagues from the University of Lagos to form the contingent from Nigeria in the institute. As contained in the agreement, all travelling expenses, including tuition and other learning material were provided to the students by the Soviet authorizes at no cost. Apart from that, students received monthly stipend from the government for their up- keep. All these support,

however, ceased with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the inability of both the University of Ibadan and the Pushkin Institute to renew their agreement". That witnessed a period of students spending their four years in the departments of their Universities without the emersion programme. This was so till the year 2005 when a sort of understanding was reached with the authorities of Volgograd State Technical University to enable students of the University of Lagos to do their programme in the University. This necessitated reaching of mutual understanding between the Russian Unit of the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which makes it possible for students of both universities to study in Volgograd for the emersion programme. The University of Ibadan is still grappling with their students having the four year programme in the university (Chukwube, 2010).

5. Problems of Studying Russian Language in Nigeria

In spite of the benefits that the citizens of Nigeria are to derive in the acquisition of Russian language, the language is embedded with some obvious bottlenecks as a shown below:

I. Government Attitude towards the Language

Despite the fact that Russian language has been declared as the third official language in Nigeria, the government is doing nothing to improve the teaching of the language. In the 80s, both the students and lecturers of Russian language in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka were enjoying supports in form of scholarship from the government. Nowadays, there is nothing of that nature, rather the students pay through their noses to be able to complete their course in Russian language. The necessary infrastructures like language laboratory, internet facilities and textual materials are not provided for the departments of foreign languages. Another nagging setback in the study of Russian language in Nigerian Universities is the absence of a common framework of reference for languages, which would provide guidelines and standards to facilitate educational and occupational mobility, as in the case with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This document was compiled by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project 'Language Learning for European Citizenship' (Council of Europe, 2011). It serves as a practical tool by providing clear standards for goals to be attained at successive stages of language learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. The CEFR is used as a guideline to describe achievements of foreign language students across Europe and increasingly, in other countries, it also serves as a framework for language learning, teaching and assessment.

II. Lack of Awareness and Interest

According to Chukwube (2010), Russian as a course still remains strange to many Nigerians, including the so-called elite. Students who study the course sometimes feel ashamed to identify with the course and oftentimes claim to be studying other courses instead. Ignorance of the marketability of the course is another factor. and because in many instances, the bulk of students admitted to study the course are those who failed to meet up with the requirements of their courses of first choice, such students feel inferior to other of their contemporaries, especially at the beginning of their studies, but regain full confidence at the later stage. However, many of the Russian students are seeing themselves as victims of circumstances. They do not see any prospect in Russian language which they are studying but they are there in the Russian department because they cannot do otherwise. As a result, they do not have interest in the language. Meanwhile, interest is an essential tool in learning. Any student who lacks interest cannot learn effectively. To check this therefore, a lot of awareness needs to be created and the responsibility falls on both the students and the lecturers.

III. Inadequate provision of Teaching Aids and Self-evaluation Mechanisms

Adequate provision of teaching aids has always been a problem in Nigerian universities. None of the three universities teaching Russian can boast of well equipped language laboratory and library for the course. Where available, books are very old with no availability of modern journals. None of the departments has computer with Russian keyboards, video sets, DVD sets, cassette players and films. Although the University of Lagos is now determined to overhaul the entire system, similar efforts in the past yielded only minor result. And the extents of efforts of other universities are yet to be determined. More importantly, there is a clear lack of institutionalized tools and mechanisms in place to evaluate and assess the teaching styles and learning styles as well as the performance of Russian language students on a regular basis. Besides University examinations, prescribed tests and continuous assessments which are obligatory for all university courses, there are also no other specific institutionalized tools, such as Russian language placement tests, which assess the competences of language students before they admitted to Russian language programme. The curriculum in the Nigerian education system is predominantly examination-oriented and this is evident at all examinable levels of education.

IV. Dearth of Lecturers

The dearth of lecturers of Russian language has been hindering the growth of the course and consequently, the spread of the language to the nooks and crannies of the Nigeria. This also brought about the extinction of Russian language no sooner that it was created at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). Another instance is the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which for a long time had

only one lecturer teaching the course. Presently, the Department has 7 lecturers teaching Russian language in Nsukka. Ade-Ojo (2006) affirms that till early 90s, the University of Lagos had only two lecturers teaching the course. The University of Ibadan was better than the others in terms of lecturers, apparently, because of the University authority's earlier contact with the Pushkin Institute in Moscow, and by extension, some organizations such as the Nigeria- Russia Friendship Association, which was determined to assist individuals or organizations in getting good links with the Soviet authorities and agencies. In Nigeria today, about 90% of the lecturers of Russian language are products of the Pushkin Institute either at undergraduate or at post-graduate level. Today, however, the University of Ibadan can boast of five qualified lecturers teaching the course. The same is at the University of Lagos where five lecturers are on ground. This does not, however imply that it is Eldorado already as the total numbers of Russian lecturers in Nigeria is a far cry from the needed number. Another nagging setback in the study of Russian language in Nigerian Universities is the emersion programme. Because of the huge cost of sending students on the programme, which is entirely borne by the parents of the students involved, many students shun from the travel thereby denying themselves the obvious benefits. This consequently increases the task of few available lecturers in the departments (Chukwube, 2010).

V. Extinction of Russian Cultural Centre

In the past, there was a Russian cultural centre in Lagos that had quite reasonable number of modern electronic materials that were used in projecting the culture of the country. The library of the centre was made available to students and the reading public. Historical and cultural films were shown at the centre during Russian public holidays and students were opportune to take advantage of it. The centre went moribund even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Also, Russian lecturers in the past used to visit the Pushkin Institute in Moscow for refresher courses for a period of one to two months in summer. It was sponsored by the then Soviet government. The importance of this can only be imagined. The exercise was long stopped and MAPRIAL, an umbrella that unified and occasionally assembled teachers of Russian language all over the world is either extinct or less heard about in Nigeria. The effect of this is that Russian lecturers are less exposed and entirely out of tune with the dynamics of teaching the language (Chukwube, 2010). This is detrimental to the students and slow down the pace of growth of the language in the country.

6. Prospects of Russian Language in Nigeria

It is essential to note that Nigerian students have profited greatly from the two Institutions in Russia. Apart from the one year emersion programme for undergraduate students, the Pushkin Institute has succeeded in training a couple of

Nigeria students at Masters and Doctorate levels. These Nigerians presently constitute the bulk of teaching staff of the language both at the University of Ibadan and Lagos. All these, unfortunately, ended with disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is now a herculean task for many parents to send their children or wards to study in Russia because of the astronomical cost. In reacting to this, the University of Lagos and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka have now made it voluntary to embark on the project. However, students who cannot afford such amounts are allowed to complete their four years in their departments. Another turning point in the study of Russian language in Nigeria is the efforts of the National University Commission (NUC) to modify and draw Benchmark Academic Standard for Postgraduate programme in Russian Languages in Nigerian universities (Chukwube, 2010). This is a welcome development and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka is counting on this opportunity to establish its postgraduate programme in Russian language.

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Language is a critical element of culture through which it reveals its fascinating power. Language learning is considered to be principally instrumental and there different reasons why students chose to study a specific language. Some students may want to study English and French because they were familiar languages studied in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. Some may want to study Spanish because they have done French language before. Some others may want to study Arabic because they are Muslims or because they have heard about the beautiful and interesting culture of the Arabs. In recent times, China's growing economy and the partnership between China and Nigeria is motivating some students to study Chinese. With regards to Russian language, there are people with high reputation in Nigeria who studied in the former Soviet Union and therefore encourage their children and wards to study Russian; but candidly, many students are not motivated to study the language. However, this study explored the nitty-gritty of the study of Russian language vis-à-vis Universities currently offering the course, students' encouragement, students enrolment and availability or otherwise of lecturers. For the language to have survived in the country in the last 58 years under the aforementioned problems is praiseworthy. There is no doubt that the language has come to stay in Nigeria. From the foregoing; it is obvious that the growth and spread of Russian language in Nigeria, and indeed, in Africa should not be the overriding concern of the individual universities alone but also, the Russian government. Therefore, the following recommendations were made to uplift the benefits of studying Russian language in Nigeria:

- i. Lecturers of Russian language should intensify efforts to communicate even outside the classroom setting in the Russian language among themselves and with the students who are at the later stage of their studies. This will help students build

confidence in them and be proud to be associated with the course. Students themselves should try to always communicate in the language not minding the obvious mistakes they could make;

ii. The Russian government should increase the number of its annual scholarship awards to Nigerians and reasonable percentage allocated to the study of the language;

iii. Nigerian government should encourage the respective universities through better funding and sponsorship of some programmes related to the teaching of the language such as conferences and seminars;

iv. Russian government should donate recent books and other teaching aids through some agencies and organizations to these universities as it had once done. Such gestures would spur the students towards more dedication and confidence. Also, Russian authorities should help to defray part of the expenses incurred by students in the immersion programme;

v. The summer courses for Russian language teachers should be reintroduced in Nigeria and sponsored by concerned authorities of the countries. This will boost the morale of lecturers and make them globally compliant. New entrants will be attracted into the profession and lecturers of the course would see themselves as being equal to the tasks (Chukwube, 2010);

vi. Nigerian government should intensify effort to provide language laboratory and library with recent books including internet facilities. At the same time, the government should embrace a more positive attitude towards the Russian language learning. Learning of Russian language should be made compulsory in all secondary schools (both public and private) in the country. Also, passing Russian language at credit level must be made compulsory for all the students intended to study Russian language at the university. This will go a long way in imposing more seriousness in the students;

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